

AboutTown

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Edina Family Uses Tragedy To Offer Hope To Those Struggling With Pain And Addiction

By Emilie Kastner

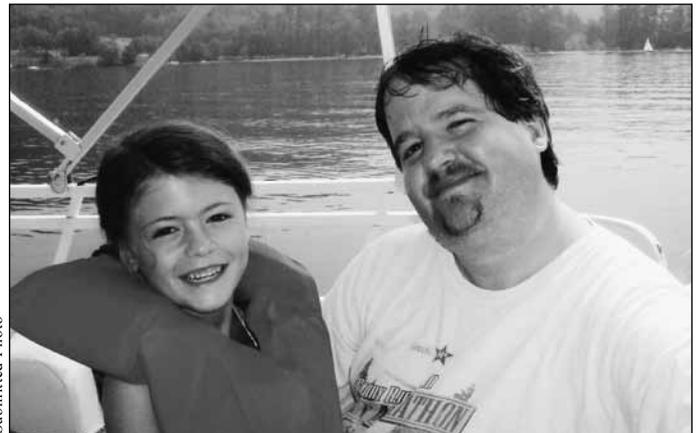
In the blink of an eye, a person's life can change forever. That was the case for Steve Rummler, when an injury in 1996 left him suffering with chronic spinal pain for the rest of his life.

Unable to diagnose or pinpoint the physical origin of the pain, which he described as electric shockwaves moving up and down his back and neck, medical professionals referred him to various specialists until he was sent back to his primary care doctor in 2005 and prescribed opioids.

"When he was prescribed opioids for the first time," said his fiancée, Lexi Reed Holtum, "it was like a miracle for him that he was able to live his day relatively pain free" because no other pain medication that he'd been prescribed in the nine years prior had been able to relieve his pain and improve his quality of life.

However, Rummler eventually became addicted and, after a long battle between relieving his pain and fighting addiction, he died July 1, 2011, of an accidental overdose. A note found among his belongings read, "At first it was a lifeline. Now it is a noose around my neck."

Edina residents Bill and Judy Rummler, Steve Rummler's parents, channeled their grief into helping others who are struggling with pain and addiction. Just two weeks after Steve's death, on July 15, 2011, they founded the Steve Rummler Hope Foundation.



Steve Rummler, pictured with fiancée Lexi Reed Holtum's daughter, Isabella, died of an accidental drug overdose July 2011 after suffering from chronic pain for 15 years.

"Addiction is not a choice; it's a disease and it can happen to anyone – to people from all walks of life," said Judy Rummler, President and CFO of the Foundation. "Fifteen thousand people a year die from prescription drug overdoses – one person every 19 minutes. In many cases, there's so much shame associated with it that people don't talk about it."

The Steve Rummler Hope Foundation aims to raise public awareness to the dangers of prescription drug abuse and addiction in the treatment of chronic pain, to better educate healthcare professionals and to seek ways to improve care for those struggling with chronic pain and addiction. Four program areas of the Foundation include Advocacy, to improve public policy and legislation;

Awareness; Prescriber Education, which provides continuing medical education on responsible opioid prescribing; and Patient Care, to create support groups and offer alternatives to narcotic drugs for the treatment of pain.

“In addition to changing and saving lives, this is enabling us to deal with our grief,” said Bill Rummler, Chairman and CEO. “Rather than having Steve die and doing nothing about it, while we still grieve, it is helped by the things we are doing for others.”

The Foundation also has a Medical Advisory Committee comprised of six doctors who specialize in pain management and addiction. Dr. Charles Reznikoff, Internal Medicine Doctor at Hennepin County Medical Center, teaches medical students about addiction and opioids as they rotate through the hospital. He has a subspecialty in addiction medicine and speaks at various events on behalf of the Foundation.

“If you ask a medical student, ‘How many hours do you get teaching you how to negotiate difficult situations with patients?’ they’ll say maybe none, or maybe an hour or two,” said Reznikoff. “And then they get hundreds of hours in biochemical reactions that they’ll never use. So, we’re trying to bring more educational opportunities.”

The Foundation recently granted funds to the Minnesota Chapter of the American College of Physicians for an educational event about opioid prescribing at the Minneapolis Convention Center. Through the grant, free admission was provided for all medical trainees.

The Foundation has been invited to speak at additional hospitals and residency programs. The Foundation is involved in speaking at a training on the issue just about every week, Reznikoff said, including continuing medical education events, at which doctors are required to log 50 hours every year.

“I think that there’s a well-meaning but naïve point of view that doctors have it all under control – that doctors know what they’re doing [in regards to opioid prescribing],” said Reznikoff, who encourages patients to advocate for themselves. Ask a lot of questions to ensure that the prescription is appropriate and is the correct quantity, and challenge the doctors to give full and informed consent, he said.

Steve Rummler graduated from Edina High School in 1986, where he took Advanced Placement courses and was an all-conference soccer player. He played drums, guitar and keyboard, and was a vocalist for the popular local band “The GooneyBirds.” In 1996, he graduated from the University of Minnesota, on the Dean’s List, with a bachelor’s degree in economics and went on to work as a financial advisor – the same year as his accident. Despite the pain, he continued to be successful and was named a “FIVE STAR: Best in Client Satisfaction Wealth Manager” in 2009 by *Mpls St Paul Magazine*.

“You just don’t think it’s going to happen to someone like that, but it can happen to anyone,” said Judy Rummler. “Addiction doesn’t discriminate; it can happen to anyone.”

“We have a medical science that says it’s a disease, but yet, even still, a lot of doctors don’t believe addiction is a disease,” said Reed Holtum, who now serves as Vice President of the Foundation. “And the truth is, it’s not a moral failing; no human being on this planet wants to die and ruin their life and hurt the people they love from alcohol or drug use.”

In 2009, it became clear to his primary care doctor that Steve Rummler was obtaining prescription opioids from multiple sources, said Reed Holtum. “In our medical model today, we have people being treated by one doctor, maybe the psychologist and then a primary care doctor and then specialty doctors. And there’s no system for all those doctors to be communicating with each other.” This is why the Foundation advocates for increased use of the Prescription Monitoring Program, which uses a web-based application to make patients’ prescription information available to prescribers and pharmacists.

Steve Rummler went to the Pain Rehabilitation Center at Mayo Clinic in 2010 where patients are taught to use alternative methods of pain alleviation and was tapered off the opioids and clonazepam, a benzodiazepine he had also been prescribed for anxiety. He later relapsed and, at the request of his family and fiancée in April 2011, completed 28 days of treatment at Hazelden, an addiction treatment facility in Center City, Minn. During that time, the doctor who had been prescribing the opioids was under investigation by the Minnesota Board of Medical Practice for unethical prescribing and surrendered his medical license. Shortly after his release from Hazelden, Steve Rummler relapsed again. Since he had lost his source, when his prescription ran out, he sought out illegal drugs – the street opioid heroine – from which he overdosed and died.

“One of the things that we know to be true was that hydrocodone products ... are Schedule 3,” said Reed Holtum, “which means that your doctor can prescribe you refills without a visit. And we would like to see it moved to Schedule 2, because what happened for Steve was that after he got out of treatment, he had his refills at the pharmacy waiting for him.” Vicodin – a hydrocodone combination drug, which is an opioid – is the No. 1 prescription written in the United States, she said.

According to the Journal of American Medical Association, 17 percent of all scripts filled in the United States are for an opioid. “There is a huge problem with unused controlled substances sitting around in houses,” said Reznikoff, who encourages people to go through their medicine cabinets to dispose of unused medications. “Most counties now have drop boxes.”

“He said his intention was to go back into treatment that same day that he died on our living room couch,” said Reed Holtum. “That day, he was supposed to go back. That’s why we’re here, doing the Foundation. We want to provide hope for others in Steve’s situation.”

A medicine disposal drop box in Edina is located at 7001 York Ave. S. To view a list of drop box locations in the area, visit www.hennepin.us/medicine. For more information about the Foundation, email hope@steverummlerhopefoundation.org or visit www.rummlerfoundation.org.